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SUBJECT: JERUSALEM MEDIA REACTION (12/31): "Gaza is dying...what are Arabs waiting for?"

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Main Stories:  
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All the Palestinian dailies lead with the ongoing Israeli offensive in Gaza, with black banner headlines reading "The Massacre in its Fourth Day" (Al Ayyam), "The Air Force Continues to Spread Death and Destruction in Gaza" (Al Hayat Al Jadeeda), and "The Air Force Destroys More Public Buildings and Grad Missiles [Hit] Beersheba" (Al Quds). Above-the-fold photos in Al Ayyam and Al Hayat Al Jadeeda show demolished buildings in Gaza, while the one in Al Quds show Gazans lining up to buy bread. Al Quds reports that according to an updated medical report from Gaza, 1750 Palestinians have been injured in the Israeli strikes and 387 killed-half of them civilians. Al Ayyam reports that 23 Palestinians were killed, and 120 injured, on the fourth day of the Israeli offensive in Gaza. In further reporting, Al Ayyam states that the Israeli cabinet agreed to mobilize 2500 military reservists in an apparent preparation for a land offensive in Gaza, and cites AFP in quoting the Israeli Deputy Defense Minister Matan Vilnai as saying that Israel is ready for weeks of combat against Hamas. The paper also cites the Israeli radio quoting Israeli security sources that the next two days will be decisive in determining whether a land operation will be launched against Hamas in Gaza. Al Quds reports on Hamas missiles hitting the Israeli city of Beersheba in the south, and adds that the Israeli woman who was killed by a Hamas rocket in Ashdod on Monday, December 29, was the sister of the Israeli Minister of the Interior, Meir Sheetrit.

The three papers front-page US efforts to achieve a ceasefire in Gaza and report on a phone call yesterday between President Bush and President Abbas to discuss the requirements for a ceasefire, and add that Washington seeks to involve Egypt and Jordan in a long term truce agreement in Gaza, on the condition that Hamas commits to such an agreement first. The front pages of Al Ayyam and Al Hayat Al

Jadeeda quote Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak refusing to open the Rafah border crossing to Gaza "in order not to fall into the Israeli trap of sustaining Gaza's separation from the West Bank," and further report that Mubarak will not open Rafah without an international mechanism and the presence of Palestinian Authority police forces at the crossing. Al Quds' front page reports that Egypt will present a draft action plan to the Arab states, proposing that the Rafah border crossing be opened after a ceasefire has been achieved, and operate under international or Arab mechanisms to ensure full compliance with the agreement. Al Quds further reports on a French proposal for a 48-hour ceasefire for humanitarian purposes, which is being considered by Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak, according to news agencies. The paper also cites Reuters reporting that French President Nicholas Sarkozy, who will receive the Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni on January 1 in Paris, might visit Israel next Monday to discuss the Gaza situation. All the papers report that the EU has demanded an immediate ceasefire on humanitarian grounds and that the EU will send a ministerial delegation to the region very soon.

Al Ayyam carries on an inside page the full press release announcing the US donation of 85 million dollars to UNRWA for humanitarian assistance to Palestinian refugees. Al Hayat Al Jadeeda front-pages a general report on Arab and international humanitarian assistance to Gaza, highlighting details of the US donation.

An Al Quds inside page reports on a poll conducted by Near East Consulting, revealing that 58% of Palestinians oppose Hamas' declaration ending the truce with Israel, 68% support peace with Israel, 65% want Hamas to change its stance on Israel, 60% would

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re-elect PA President Abbas if elections were held, and 59% support Abbas remaining in the PA Presidency.

All the papers report on rallies held in different Palestinian and world cities to protest against the Israeli offensive in Gaza. An Al Ayyam inside page reports on a small rally in front of the US consulate in Jerusalem, demanding US intervention to stop the Israeli attack. Al Hayat Al Jadeeda reports on an inside page that the US Consul General Jake Waller Zolot met Saeb Erekat, head of the PLO Negotiation Department, in Jericho yesterday to discuss the ending of hostilities in Gaza.

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BLOCK QUOTES:  
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1) An Al Quds editorial entitled "Gaza is dying... what are Arabs waiting for?" (12/31) comments that: "The way to end violence in Gaza is to release the Gaza Strip and the citizens there and end their suffering, and for the peace process to progress and bear fruit. As long as Israel does not prove its seriousness and credibility towards the peace requirements, violence and counter violence will continue, and there is danger that the violence will expand to include the Arab and Islamic world, and perhaps beyond. Aggression should stop, and the border crossings-starting with Rafah-should be opened."

2) Hani Habeeb opines in Al Ayyam under the title "What's the need for an Arab summit?" (12/31): "The summit conference, if held, would not discuss the Israeli aggression, but would discuss a marginal issue, namely the Rafah crossing, with the intention of pointing the compass needle towards Cairo and holding it responsible for what has happened and is happening, although all parties understand that opening this crossing requires in the first place a clear consent, even if implicit, from Israel, which controls all the factors for using or not using this crossing, considering the current balance of power that is known to everyone. Perhaps moving the northern front and Hezbollah forces is the action that can ease the Israeli offensive on the Gaza Strip, but this front remains silent, just like the Syrian front!"

WALLES